

“If finding out what happened could save another life at least something good would come from our son’s death”

Family, co-workers want truth about Kentucky Ford worker’s death

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Two weeks since the death of Ivan Bridgewater III, a 41-year-old electrician at Ford’s Kentucky Truck Plant in Louisville, family members and co-workers are demanding to know the truth about the still unexplained death, which occurred in the early morning hours of December 9. While the deputy coroner of Jefferson County told local media last week that the cause of death was “blunt force trauma,” company officials, the United Auto Workers union and government authorities have not explained the circumstances of Bridgewater’s death.

“The one thing we want to know is how he died,” Ivan’s stepmother, Diana Bridgewater, wrote in an email to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “We know it was blunt force trauma, but from what? Until we know that, there will be no closure for us. If finding out what happened to our son could save another life and another family of what we have endured, at least something good would come from our son’s death. Thank you and please continue discussing this accident until we have the answers we need.”

The *Louisville Courier-Journal* and local news outlets have dropped the story. While reporting that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is investigating the fatal accident, the trade journal *Automotive News* reported December 15 that the Kentucky medical examiner had not yet signed off on the coroner’s findings on the cause of death.

The Ford worker’s father, Ivan Bridgewater II, posted on his Facebook page that he has still not received the coroner’s report. His son was “an awesome young man” and “totally devoted to his family,” he wrote in a December 16 post, adding, “Then on December tenth he was killed in a mysterious accident. There seems to be some question if he died by electrocution, as first reported, or by blunt force trauma. I’m still waiting for the coroner’s report. Many of you have written and been supportive since my son’s death.

I want to say thank you.”

With rank-and-file workers raising questions about unsafe conditions, UAW Vice President James Settles issued a December 12 statement saying, “UAW Representatives from the National Joint Health & Safety Committee are onsite leading the safety investigation.” This is cold comfort for workers, however, since any investigation by the joint labor-management committee will only result in a whitewash of the company and the union, which will leave the unsafe conditions in place. As one worker told the *WSWS*, “It’s the “UAW-Ford Joint Committee on the Health and Safety of UAW and Ford.”

When called by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, a spokeswoman at UAW Local 862, who refused to identify herself, said, “You will have to speak to Ford Motor Company. The union has no comment. The investigation is not over with and we won’t say anything until it is completed.”

OSHA can take up to six months to issue its findings, and the federal agency rarely holds companies accountable, while top executives and wealthy shareholders get away scot-free. A survey of the OSHA web site shows less than 30 “actions” involving Ford Motor Company over the last decade, with the multi-billion-dollar auto giant being issued total fines of around \$28,000, including for “serious” safety violations. No individual fine exceeded \$5,000, and many were reduced by half or more through “informal settlements,” which were reached through OSHA’s so-called strategic partnership with the UAW and Ford.

Family members are regularly stonewalled by company, union and government officials. As the *WSWS* has reported, Whitney Arizzola, the widow of 31-year-old steelworker Jonathan Arizzola, was forced to subpoena documents from US Steel after her husband’s September 2016 death in Gary, Indiana. In that case, the local coroner showed up three-and-

a-half hours after the accident and caught management removing objects from the dead worker's body.

In September 2015, Bridgewater was hired into the truck plant, which employs more than 8,000 workers who build Ford's highly profitable F-250-F-550 Super Duty pickups and Ford Expedition and Lincoln Navigators sports utility vehicles. Just three months earlier, UAW President Dennis Williams issued a letter to workers noting an "epidemic of injuries" across the industry, including the deaths of five UAW members in the previous 24 months involving the failure of "lockout/tag out" procedures (to disable a machine before doing maintenance or repairs) and other safety precautions.

"Remember, it is the responsibility of all members to first follow safety procedures," the UAW executive declared, suggesting workers themselves were largely to blame for these tragedies. "UAW represented facilities take great pride in efficiency and continuous improvement. But the Union's support of modern operating agreements that include flexibility and team work does not mean that we eliminate safety resources. If lockout takes time away from production so be it, we cannot cut corners and perform unsafe work. The cost of life and limb is too high," Williams preached.

As every worker knows, however, the chief role of the UAW is to enforce speed up and make sure the flow of profits is never disrupted. In this way, Williams, Settles and other UAW executives can continue to prosper from the Ford shares held by the UAW and the money flowing into various labor-management "training centers" and phony charities.

"I work at Kentucky Truck Plant, and didn't hear anything about this [fatality] until way after the fact," a KTP worker commented on the WSWS. "There are no safety stand downs, no mention of it by the team leaders or supervisors. Very odd situation considering how much Ford and the union claim to care about health and safety, All I hear them say is for every minute that the line is shut down it costs Ford approximately \$10,000 so there is a huge incentive and push to never stop the line, even when there's an accident.

"The team leader concept is the worst thing that the union has ever voted on. All they do is side with management and honestly so does the union so it's very difficult to get some of your issues heard, even when it deals with seniority, ergonomics, or health and safety.

"The UAW has forgotten where they came from and how to really serve its members. Everything I've seen over the past few contracts puts the company and union in bed more than ever. Under the scare of job security and signing bonuses, they pass shady contracts with no full details or disclosures other than only the best parts.

"The motto we always hear is just be glad you HAVE A

JOB! Now with a 2 tier pay system, the union and company have only separated us even more. Those in the 2nd tier or 'supplemental status' can only put their heads down and work as fast as possible, never being able to speak up for fear of the 'team leader' telling supervision and either being let go or never making permanent status. By giving power to a union member under the guise of team leader, all that has done is give the company ultimate power to control productivity, production, and to quell any voice out on the floor in objection. Until members can feel like their voices are heard when they see something unsafe happening, or have the company on their back pushing for more...there will be more fatalities and injuries."

Kathy, a worker with five years at the plant, said, "I've complained about unsafe conditions near my work location, but I was told the union and health and safety approved it. The other day I saw a TPT (Temporary Part-Time) worker complaining about the lack of union representation, and a UAW rep shouted at him, 'If you don't like it, you can get another f.... job!'

"Bridgewater was working by himself, and skilled trades workers are not supposed to do that. All management wants is production numbers. We're knocking out 70 trucks per hour.

"Ivan was killed where frames are moved on conveyor/train systems and forklifts are always maneuvering in the bay area. He was probably hit by one of the lifts. A few months ago, a manager was hit by a lift and they were talking about amputating his leg. Injuries happen all the time. You talk to the union reps and nothing is done.

"When the next contract comes people are going to stop paying union dues. They are done with the UAW. Under the current contract it takes eight years for an 'in-progression' worker to make top dollar. Who knows if the UAW is going to renegotiate that in the next contract, and make us work even longer to get top pay? They are doing buyouts of 'legacy' workers now so they can turn the whole workforce into low-paid, disposable workers."



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